

Simplicity in Christ

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Paul wrote, “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity that is in Christ.” (2 Cor. 11:3) This statement has perhaps never been as truly applicable to any portion of New Testament life than it is to that part which theologians call “ecclesiology” – the study of church form, structure and governance. With nearly two thousand years of varying and conflicting traditions surrounded by myriad layers of confusion, it is nearly impossible to peel back all the deceptive additions that Satan has piled upon the simple truths that Christ gave in the gospel. But as the end of the age draws closer and final preparations to be spotless and blameless at His return requires that this simplicity be yet again revealed to those who would press on to be what He desires.

Church

What is a church? This question is never easy to answer because so many have tried to use the term to simultaneously include a local assembly, denominations and the spiritual assembly of all saints (holy ones, those set apart to Christ – a group of individuals whose identities are truly known only to the mind of Christ and God) from all times and all places. Let’s delve into the mess that “theologians” and Greek scholars and translators have made of it all.

First, the English word “church” is easily traced linguistically to the Greek word “kuriakon” [2960]. It is a word which means simply “belonging to a lord” (“lord” being the Greek word “kurios” [2962]) Simple enough so far – but hold on, rough waters lay directly ahead.

This Greek word “kuriakon” that evolved into (or through) the Scottish word “kirk” into the English word “church” is actually used twice in the original Greek New Testament. (1 Cor. 11:20, Rev. 1:10) Logically, then, one would expect to find the English word “church” used only twice in the English New Testament. Surprisingly, however, we find the word “church” used **114 times** in the English King James New Testament! How do we (as charitably as possible) account for this huge discrepancy?

In the Greek New Testament, there is the word “ekklesia” [1577] that was used extensively (115 times to be exact) in connection with the people of Christ. Well, in the French language there is the word “eglise” and in Spanish there is the word “iglesia” but in English, for whatever reasons, there is no direct “descendent” or corollary to “ekklesia” as there obviously are in French and Spanish. So the KJV translators had to fish around for a word to translate “ekklesia” and the one they opted for was “church.” It is not to be overlooked, however, that King James, in his bias and desire to be and remain the head of the Anglican “church,” insisted that his translators use “certain of the old words,” particularly “church.”

Perhaps in early 1600, this was not the linguistic blunder it has now evolved into. But even then, “church” primarily meant “a building for special uses, particularly religious, particularly Christian.” The blunder here is that the New Testament writers, in deliberately using the word “ekklesia,” *never, ever* - not even once – had in mind a specialized building that housed and enabled rituals, litanies and hierarchical clergy. Not once. When the writers wanted to talk about such buildings, they certainly had several Greek words to choose from: a “temple” as a place for rituals of worship (“hieron” [2411]), a “temple” as a building in which God or a god dwells (“naos” [3485]), a “house” as a building belonging to a person or for a particular usage (“oikos” [3624]) or a “synagogue” as a religious lecture hall and school (“sunagoge” [4864]). All of these words are used

extensively throughout the New Testament. But the New Testament writers chose “ekklesia.”

When we turn to look at other English words that could have been used by the KJV translators, we do find words like “congregation” and “assembly.” That is, the meanings of these words easily carry something more of “ekklesia’s” meaning than does “church.” And indeed, “congregation” is now used in the New King James (to replace KJV “church” in Acts 7:38) and “assembly” is even used in the KJV itself to translate 3 instances of “ekklesia.” (Acts 19:32, 39, 41 - an insightful study in its own right) But the KJV translators opted for “church” and confusion that has roots that go beyond the Dark Ages has been upon the body of Christ’s followers ever since.

“Ekklesia” is “the called out ones.” It was the group of citizens of a particular place who were assembled or gathered to attend to the business or need of their place, their home city or town or village. The New Testament writers took this word and applied it to the followers of Christ – in much the same way they had seized upon the word “agape” and given it the transcendence we now routinely associate with God’s love for sinful, fallen mankind. “Ekklesia” then are the people of Christ who, having been called out of the kingdom of darkness and into Christ’s kingdom of light, were to assemble so as to attend to the business or need of His kingdom of light *in their own place* - be that a city, town, village or neighborhood. When we recall that the original believers met in homes (and not specialized buildings) as the ekklesia, we can gather that, as the numbers grew, each group enjoyed a smaller focus. That is, when the believers were fewer in number, the scope of their activities would have been the whole city even though the population of the city might well be in the thousands. But as the number of believers grew, so did the number of houses being used to assemble grow – and the city was then divided as to “jurisdiction” (use the term loosely!) by virtue of where the house was in which they met. This was no dry, legal, power-hungry sectioning off of the city so as to rake in the most tithes and offerings but rather a living recognition of the personal and corporate responsibility for one’s own place of residence and existence.

When we see this definition of “local ekklesia,” we should be able to immediately see the damage done by the denominational commuter “church.” It has pulled people out of their neighborhoods, separated them from their neighboring brothers and sisters in Christ (their rightful ekklesia) and built up not only physical distance but “theological” and ideological walls between them as well. The demonic steps in wherever possible to maintain these divisions as the people are separated into differing branches of the tree (which represent the kingdom of God) where the birds of the air (the demonic) make their nests (the denominations. – Mt. 13:32)

The Whole Building

Now if we can but recognize also that even “ekklesia” is not the end-all, be-all that the “church” has tried to make itself into, we will have come far in our pursuit of truth. That is, Jesus did not preach the “gospel of the ekklesia” – He preached “the gospel of the kingdom.” “The kingdom of God is here among you. Repent!” was His and the apostles’ message. (Mt. 4:17, Mk. 6:12, Lk. 9:2, etc.) Paul preached the same message to the Athenians: “God now *commands* all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30), and the Jews of Thessalonica accused the Christians of proclaiming “another king – Jesus.” (Acts 17:7) The emphasis of their preaching was not on “how to assemble” or even on “how to be the ekklesia” – this is evident from the scarcity of instructions on the subject throughout the New Testament (even 115 instances is not a hugely significant portion of the New Testament!) The emphasis is on Jesus, the King, who, by His Spirit, as He said He would do, *He* will build His ekklesia! (Mt. 16:18)

As *He* builds His ekklesia, we must also recognize we are more to Him than an assembly of

His citizens. Paul wrote,

“Now, therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit.” (Eph. 2:19-22)

Elsewhere, Paul also tells us, “...the ekklesia...is His body...” (Eph. 1:22-23, etc.) Peter adds that we are “a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet. 2:5) And John tells us that Jesus “has made us kings and priests to God...” (Rev. 1:5)

Let us review all the different aspects that make up this “whole building”:

- fellow citizens indicating our attachment to the kingdom of heaven (Phlp. 3:20);
- saints – holy, set apart ones, set apart to the will of Christ and God;
- members of God’s household or family;
- a holy temple (1 Cor. 3:17, 2 Cor. 6:16, etc.);
- a habitation or house dwelling place for God (Jn. 14:23, 1 Pet. 2:5);
- a holy, royal priesthood.

That is quite a list! Assembling together as ekklesia is only the tip of the iceberg!

The Mystery of the Kingdom of God

Jesus prayed,

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one; I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.” (Jn. 17:20-23)

Throughout church history, there have been efforts to walk in this oneness that Jesus speaks of here. The first label to be applied to all believers was “catholic” which means “universal.” More recently there has been what has been called the “ecumenical” movement. This is another term which, in its basic definition, simply means “general” or “universal.” The first word, catholic, was taken over by the first large-scale sect (the Roman Catholic “church”) and the second, ecumenical, was used to congeal together a federation of sects (denominations). No fundamental, long-term solutions here!

The problem now is that the English language only has so many words that represent the concept of “one category that includes all.” Many people reject being called catholic because of the

instantaneous Romish connotations associated with it. Now many people don't want to be instantly associated with the world-wide ecumenical movement because it embraces so many things that can only be called sinful. As an aside, we should do with the word "church" what we have done with "catholic" and "ecumenical" – discard it! All these words are now rendered useless, obsolete and even antagonistic to the Message they were once used to convey because, over time and with usage, the word has accumulated additional baggage that completely changes how the word is commonly perceived. This is all the more true as the end of the age approaches and we need to distinguish between the genuine ekklesia of Christ and the false, counterfeit, apostate "church" built on the spiritually numbing traditions of men and the lethally deceptive schemes and doctrines of demons.

As we look ahead, imagining and questing for what the bride of Christ might look like if she were free of all the deceptive "church" encrustations, we come to the question of what we would look and be like if we could simply let go of our human desire and "need" for labels. What label can truly cover all that we are in Christ anyway? We are kingdomists, Monarchists, saints, family, templets, homists, priests and kings all at once! Any label we take upon ourselves will cause us to have already set our sights lower than the heights from which our predecessors have fallen, the first love of simply walking closely and quietly with our Master wherever He leads. (Rev. 2:4-5) This *is* the overarching "thing" to which we are joined when we receive, experience and obey the new birth from above. Perhaps it is simply best to call this transcendent "thing" "the mystery of the kingdom of God." (Mk. 4:11, etc.) Just don't try to make a label out of it. Let us simply recognize that as a Biblical, spiritual mystery, we require divine revelation from God to rightly understand it. This is quite consistent with the Scriptures and it will tend to preserve us from the error of thinking that because we have a word or label for it, we understand it to the full. The kingdom of God is indeed a vast expanse that cannot be fully known here in this land where we see only dimly and in part.

The mystery of the kingdom of God as it pertains to being ekklesia might be best stated as:

"A local ekklesia is the mystery of the kingdom of God manifested in a particular locality."

We will see how this can be so when we recall that God "gave [Christ] to be Head [Master, King, Lord, Absolute Ruler] over *all* things to the ekklesia..." (Eph. 1:22- emphasis added) When all the believers of a particular locale (think small – the more believers in an area, think smaller. City, town, village, neighborhood, street. The more elders – truly mature saints – available to host and/or lead a home gathering, the more "jurisdictions" a city, state, nation or region will have) join together in submission to the directives of the one and only Head Christ Jesus and refuse to take corporate steps until there is unanimous agreement (one accord), *then* we will be the answer to the prayer of Jesus for a unified body of followers.

So long as we blithely get in our cars and leave our locale (forsaking the real assembly to which we should be joined – Heb. 10:25 - and failing to discern what the body of Christ around us really is - 1 Cor. 11:29) so that we might join ourselves to a prostitute that drains our life in a building that saps our resources under the ear-scratching sermonizing of a man who lulls us to sleep, there is no hope of our ever being without spot or blemish. (see Phlp. 2:15, 2 Pet. 3:14) Rather, we will continue to be the counterfeit, the prostitute, the abomination.

Let he who has ears hear.

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